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# Deconstructing POV in TV Coverage of Black Lives Matter Protests

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## **Deconstructing POV in TV Coverage of Black Lives Matter Protests**

### **Rationale**

How is Black Lives Matter represented? What tools are available to deconstruct such representations? How may such representations impact everyday beliefs?

The Millennial generation has been raised in a culture largely devoid of mass protests and system-change movements. A Black president and corporate media celebrities such as Beyoncé and Oprah signify an era of supposed “post-racism.” The highly-segregated nature of today’s schools and neighborhoods means that most youth grow up with scant lived connection to generational cohorts of diverse racial backgrounds. In this historical context, how do young people read representations of strident African-American protest against racist police brutality? How may these readings reflect subjective beliefs about racism and social change?

In the course “Youth, Democracy, and the Entertainment Industries,” these questions were raised in a lesson that presents a media literacy framework to analyze mainstream and alternative news reports of BLM protests. Learners are prodded to look outward and internally at everyday cultural texts and subjective beliefs that construct a normative “common sense” (Gramsci, 1975) that may reinforce racist beliefs and pejorative attitudes towards (Black) political activism. The question of praxis, of whether knowledge of racism and its amplification through corporate media calls learners to political action, is woven throughout.

### **Timeline: Black Lives Matter 2014**

This assignment —BLM Media Representations—was part of a semester long focus exploring the context for and expressive practices that emerged from the Black Lives Matter movement. This particular term, Spring 2015, followed a series of heightened moments in the building force of the Black Lives Matter movement.

To contextualize this assignment, it’s useful to recall some of those key events. In August 2014, the police killing of 18-year old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri brought resounding street protests; incidents of riot-like looting and burning offered the primary images selected by mainstream media to frame the message of angry, youthful discontent. Upon the officer’s acquittal in November, protests erupted across the U.S. Varied forms of civil disobedience sought to disrupt the din of commercialized “Black Friday” holiday shopping: highway blockades, store and mall “die-ins”, public transport disruptions, marches, rallies.

The early December non-indictment of the NYC cop who killed 43-year old Eric Garner by chokehold intensified protestors outrage; Garner’s last words “I can’t breathe” were embraced and joined with “hands-up” to become the chant of the movement. While these immediate murders were catalytic, the fervor of the protests was attributed to long-term simmering rage over entrenched institutional racism by what is perceived as a militarized police presence in communities of color. Stop-and-frisk racial profiling, iniquitous drug sentencing, mass incarceration, and school zero-tolerance punitive rules have all built up what Michelle Alexander

delineates as a “New Jim Crow” racial caste system. Smartphone images beamed through the internet allow viral public display of police killings, abuse, and courts dismissals that previously were easily concealed.

Having just witnessed the later 2014 media maelstrom around these events, learners were very aware of Black Lives Matter. Most however, had little substantive understanding of the historical context for the movement.

The lead up to this two-day lesson plan included units on media literacy and the representation of “urban youth,” the school to prison pipeline, mass incarceration, and the concept of news as spectacle. As Ava DuVernay's docudrama *Selma* was then screening in cineplexes, we attended a late afternoon screening of a powerful historical drama in the Civil Rights movement that learners found especially resonant.

After this lesson, final research topics were formulated to explore varied aspects of the Black Lives Matter movement. Blog groups were formed. Learners researched and wrote three blog posts exploring Black Lives Matter issues following a Freire-inspired praxis model:

1) name and analyze the problem for root causes; 2) survey activist groups and histories to identify root solutions, including visioning alternative policies; 3) research and formulate strategies for change to advance possible roots solutions.

### **Lesson Plan: Black Lives Matter Media Representations**

In this unit, learners apply a series of media literacy questions or “frames” as in “framing the news” to news reports of Black Lives Matter protests told from contrasting points-of-view: corporate cable news and the independent Left. The objective is to generate a critical viewing lens on bias inherent in media texts and ways in which one’s personal point-of-view simultaneously instills a second-level subjective bias in shaping those readings.

The unit occurs over two classes: The first class is the set-up that includes a demonstration applying the media literacy framework to a sample news clip and the introduction of certain analytic concepts. For homework, students view the assigned clips and write response notes to be shared in the next class in small groups and then in full-class discussion.

### **Class One: Media Literacy Questions**

The class opens a brief overview of media-monitoring projects as a form of “media justice” activism. In this class, Freire’s notion of praxis is introduced early on; wherever possible, learners are presented with links between critical analysis and social action. (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) While the unit is not a formal media-monitoring initiative, the act of systematically viewing TV news for systemic bias presents an important strategy that has been used to pressure corporate media around issues of race and representation. The pioneering model is a 1964 legal battle advanced by civil rights activists who monitored a Jackson, Mississippi TV station (WLBT) to quantify its racist, inequitable coverage of African-Americans. The FCC was eventually forced to revoke the station’s license (Mills, 2004). A more recent effort by the Bay Area Youth Media Council traced ways in which so-called “mainstream” commercial TV, radio,

and print media shape negative representations of youth of color: stories and images of crime and violence predominate, youth voices are rarely heard, and root causes such as poverty and under resourced schools are largely ignored (Youth Media Council, 2002, 2002, 2005).

Three questions (frames) drawn from one of these studies (Youth Media Council, 2002) will set the framework for the TV viewing assignment:

1. VOICES/POV: Who is speaking in news coverage of youth?
2. CONTEXT: Is context given to issues of crime, poverty, and education in coverage of youth?
3. IMAGES: Are loaded images and language used to describe youth in news coverage?

The questions are read aloud. A sample news clip of Black Lives Matter protests is viewed. The questions are read again. Then in small groups, students share their responses to the news clips and report back for a full-class discussion. The news sources learners will view for the homework assignment contrast CNN as a leading corporate cable news outlet with Democracy Now, a daily, hour-long news show that offers a Left “progressive” perspective. For the in-class demonstration; however, I present a briefer clip (three-four minutes) from a regional news outlet.

In preparation for the first class, find several news clips of Black Lives Matter protests to present for the in-class demonstration. While the CNN/Democracy Now clips referenced in the assignment guide offer clear contrasts for media analysis, it’s purposeful to screen a shorter clip in class, possibly from a regional station.

Take some time to sample the range of ways in which Black Lives Matter is represented. YouTube hosts thousands of uploads from varied sources: local, national, and international news outlets, protestor testimonials, edited activist statements, vlogger commentaries, and raw smartphone footage. Familiarize yourself with the multiplicity of genres, points-of-view, and stories told. Find several that favor certain voices, present different angles, and convey different meanings, both in the specific story told, and underlying ideological beliefs embedded in language and visuals.

For the in-class demonstration, bring one of these news clips to share. The question of what voices are heard, which are privileged, and which are silenced is quickly apparent. Typically, the voice of the newscaster is primary in constructing narrative meaning. The scripted introduction and conclusion generally frame connotative meanings that draw upon and reinforce prevailing ideological discourses.

In the set-up for this assignment, the concept of point-of-view (POV) contained in the first frame – VOICES/POV -- is useful for discerning how so-called “truth” and “reality” is hardly “objective,” but rather filtered by one’s subjective experience and worldview.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Drawn from the language of film production, point-of-view denotes objective and subjective views – the camera looking as an “objective” outsider on a scene or acting as the eyes of one of the subjects in the drama. POV also refers to different angles and focal lengths and their psychological force, e.g. a high angle looking down on a character signifies power over; a low-angle subjective shot looking up may connote subservience.

A segment from The Daily Show helps to demonstrate point-of-view in relation to power and race. In “[The R-Word](#),” (4:15) reporters Jessica Williams and Samantha Bee separately interview a panel of the opposite race on race relations in the U.S. The stark contrasts in responses to questions such as “Is racism a problem?” and “Have you ever been stopped by the police?” offers dramatic evidence of how white privilege blinds white people from seeing and feeling the subjective experiences of racism black folks encounter on a daily basis. After watching the clip, students are asked to free write their responses. The ensuing discussion points to the forces of one’s background in shaping a worldview. I assign this clip for students to re-watch as part of the homework assignment.

For the following class, students are asked to view a [CNN report by Anderson Cooper](#) from Ferguson, Missouri on the second night of street protests after the non-indictment of Officer Darren Wilson, and a [Democracy Now report](#) of a New York City Black Lives Matter march several nights later. Applying the (3) media literacy frames we’ve reviewed (VOICES/POV; CONTEXT/ROOT CAUSES; IMAGES) they write response notes comparing these two reports and select two sequences to share in class (see below under Assignment Instructions).

## **Class Two: Dialogic Deconstruction**

Students meet in small groups to discuss their written response notes to the TV news reports they viewed. A volunteer “scribe” takes notes on responses to the first and second questions to be shared back with the full class.

Before the full class discussion, I present a simple introduction to Barthes method of analyzing everyday “Mythologies” (1972). Drawing from Saussure’s theory of linguistic signs, Barthes applies semiotics to the world of living cultural texts around us. A sign is made up of the object itself, the signifier and what’s signified in its cultural meanings — the latter by no means fixed, but shaped by prevailing beliefs, aka dominant ideology. Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding essay (1980) offers a useful theoretical discussion applying a semiotic method to television.

What follows recounts a class discussion in which a semiotic analysis was applied to a spatial point-of-view in the CNN coverage that one of the student discussion groups pointed out. Images of nighttime protests from around the U.S. — Ferguson, Los Angeles, Boston, New York — shift between aerial and on-the-ground long shots of youth protesters; students suggested these may evoke feelings of fear from an unruly mob. The discussion suggested that the meanings of helicopter surveillance-like shots showing police cars with flashing lights and/or burning fires in the background (signifiers) signify a dangerous military-like situation of riotous, civil unrest.

This narrative of a perilous, out-of-control situation is reinforced by the voices featured in the CNN report: white, male newscasters, law-enforcement, and a local Black minister whose church was burned. No youth protesters or activist leaders were interviewed. The discourse was entirely focused on police management of what is portrayed as an angry mob. Framed by the interview questions of the on-the-ground newscasters, the discussion was about the immediate

*[J. Saxe]**[Deconstructing POV]*

moment rather than underlying causes of the protests – though the Black minister did suggest the protestors had valid reasons for anger that the power structure had not addressed.

I offered students my interpretation of the CNN report. The varied signifiers—high-angle shots, burning buildings, enraged youth, outsider voices of male authority commenting on the immediate moment rather than context/root causes—generates an ideological state of “moral panic” (Cohen, 1972, Hall, et al., 1978) that justifies white police state violence against youth of color.

Additionally troubling is how the CNN report conflates a mob-like situation with the wider Black Lives Matter movement. The spectacted cable news hyperfocus on one night obscures the deeper frustrations, analysis, and emergent voices of youthful activists. The complete absence of these voices in the CNN segment stands in striking contrast to the Democracy Now report. Multiple participants of varying ages, genders, and races share their motivations for participating in a New York City march: personal experiences with racial profiling, violence to family members, outrage at the prison-industrial complex and other inequities of institutional racism. While there’s a clear sympathetic point-of-view, viewers are able to hear the moral rationale for this Black Lives Matter mass mobilization.

The CNN report leaves the impression that Black Lives Matter protestors are criminal-like agents, looting and burning down their own neighborhoods. Justifiable rage unleashed through varied forms of political action across the U.S. is demonized; protest itself may be read as counterproductive, an excuse for savage-like behavior that was questioned by some students for the Ferguson protests “senseless violence.” As has been theorized for other instances of youth rebel subcultures, corporate media deflects threats to the normative order through strategies of trivialization and/or castigation as folk devils (Hebdige, 1977).

Such analysis backed by the patterns described in their response notes and charted in classroom discussion presents learners with the profoundly moral question of how they personally respond to stories and images of strident African-American protests over racist police killings called out by a wider emergent Black Lives Matter movement as endemic and systematic. Particularly, for white students, what is their relationship to these narrative constructions we call “News”?

Faced with these two contrasting media representations of fervent protest opens up many important discussion threads: In a supposed democracy where the abrogation of human rights calls citizens to “abolish the forms to which they have been accustomed,” what is the role of militant civil disobedience? What is one’s personal relationship and that of millennial peers to anti-racist civic engagement? What are possible avenues for allied political action? What does it mean to be complicit with the long-term legacy of systemic racism in the U.S.? How do these contrasting news reports resonate with other (mis)representations of Black Lives Matter protests? Am I critical reader of the “news,” asking questions such as those applied in this assignment to the multiple information streams that flow across digital screens?

As a way of concluding this unit, if time permits towards the end of this class, or more likely the beginning of the next, any one of these questions may be posed as a free write for learners to do in class, share back in pairs, and then in full class discussion.

## Assignment Instructions

1. “[The R-Word](#).” Jessica Williams and Samantha Bee convene two panels to discuss the state of race relations in America. (4.15) August 6, 2013. *The Daily Show*, Comedy Central.

Reading questions:

What does this video say about how peoples’ race/class backgrounds shape their point-of-view? How might you have responded to the Nightly Show “correspondents” questions? What feelings may have been triggered? How do you think your race/class background may affect your responses to what’s represented in language, opinions, and images?

2. [Police Brutality Protests Across the U.S. for a Second Night](#). Anderson Cooper, CNN. (14.48) November 25, 2014
3. Reports on [Black Lives Matter National Protests and Interviews with BLM Leaders](#) Democracy Now. (Watch up to 28:00) December 1, 2014.

Reading questions (written response required):

Compare the Anderson Cooper-CNN report (#2) with the Democracy Now reports (#3) by applying some media literacy questions we’ve discussed:

- Whose voices are heard? What’s the point-of-view? What impressions are you left with?
- How is context (root causes) addressed?
- What kinds of images are featured?

In the Democracy Now video (#3), what are your responses to the concerns and analysis expressed by some of the leaders and other featured speakers? In terms of root causes and root solutions, what messages seem important?

From each video, identify a brief sequence (2-3 minutes) that offers useful comparisons to share in class.

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Joel Saxe (Ph.D.) is a Lecturer in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In Western Massachusetts, he has developed media literacy projects in public high schools, with youth in detention, human service workers, and around issues of income inequality. Since 1986, Saxe has been documenting radical history and Yiddish culture in Miami Beach and New York. From this, he has produced several award-winning documentaries, publications, and an installation on Jewish radicalism. He co-produces a weekly radio show, Bread and Roses, which addresses issues of creating a fair economy and social justice.